Realism, theatricality, ritual

Aspects of the aesthetics of the installation

Petersen, Anne Ring

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Concept
Marianne Torp

With contributions by
Anne Ring Petersen
Joachim Koester
Janna Lund

REALITY CHECK

CONCEPT

Marianne Torp

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Janna Lund (CURATORIAL ASSISTANT)

HEAD OF EXHIBITION
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CATALOGUE

CONCEPT
Marianne Torp

EDITOR
Sven Bjerkhof

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE
Pernille Feldt (IMAGES)
Gitte Hou Olsen (TEXTS)

TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH (ALL ARTICLES EXCEPT TORP AND KOESTER)
Jeremy Watts

GRAPHIC DESIGN
NR2154, Troels Faber & Jacob Wildschiødtz

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Aspects of the aesthetics of the installation

Anne Ring Petersen

Keeping an eye on the movements of contemporary art is just about as problematic as sitting in a helicopter watching traffic in a major city in the middle of the rush-hour, when innumerable trains, buses, cars, motorbikes, cyclists and pedestrians are in motion in all directions across a complicated system of motorways, circular roads, radial roads, streets, alleys, lanes and paths. Anyone who wants to give an overview is forced to make simplifications. One of the commonly used strategies among art critics and art historians is to point to a contemporary 'trend', which means that they call attention to whatever seems to be most widespread: the main movement that most makes itself felt.

What direction has the trend gone in since 1990, then? Contemporary art is no less pluralistic than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, which art history has described as the decades when experimentation went in all directions so that it became impossible to define the changes in the same clear-cut way one was otherwise used to employing when describing the development of modern art – i.e. as a sequence of avant-garde 'isms' which replaced each other in turn and took the position as the trend-setter of the period. On top of all that is the so-called New Internationalism, a common product of globalisation, the enormous migratory movements of the recent decades, and also the greed for exotic novelties on the part of the commercial art world. New Internationalism has expanded the geographic boundaries of contemporary international art and enabled a multitude of non-Western artists to make a career in the global art institution system which these days includes countless mega-biennials and important art centres outside the West; the result is an even greater pluralism.'

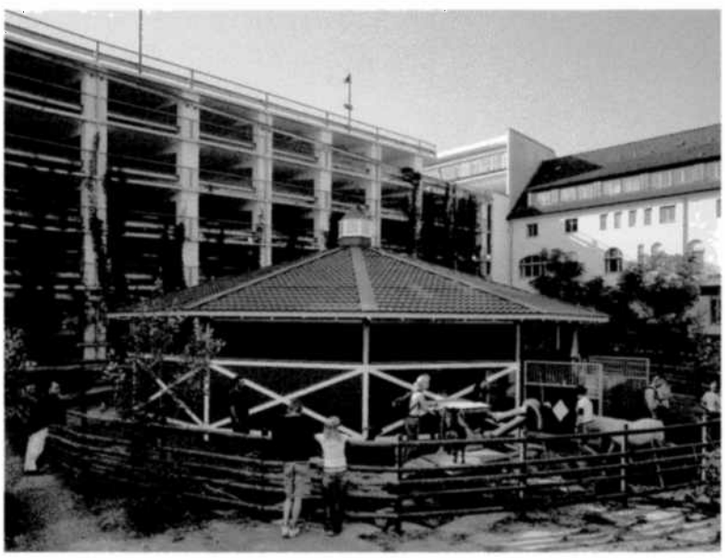
Accompanying these changes, the role of the linear sequence is definitively outplayed as a conceptual way of gaining an overview. In the present situation, the chronological series of 'isms' must give way to metaphors like 'network' and 'field',[2] which are better adapted to identifying the connection between artistic phenomena which at first sight seem very diverse or express themselves on different levels. Understanding the spectrum of artistic expressions as a 'field' or a 'network' instead of a 'sequence' is the same as stressing the mutual exchange and plurality of tendencies; at the same time the implication is that the diversity is so pronounced that it cannot be described within the framework of 'tendency' or 'trend' which is otherwise such a useful concept.

One of the post-1990s' trends that has been much discussed is the general interest in investigating the concept of "reality". Hal Foster's seminal book with relation to putting 'reality' in contemporary art on the agenda, *The Return of the Real* (1996)[3] demonstrates that an interest in reality is not something that art after 1990 has a monopoly on, even though the intensity of it is remarkable. There were also many artists in the preceding three decades who investigated the relationship between art and reality as a natural part of making a new evaluation of the prevailing notions about reality. This means that the burning question is not so much whether artists in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century are concerned with reality, but more in what way they are, and how they express this. Something rather similar is also true of another dominant trend of the period: an interest in the installation as a form of expression. This has also grown steadily since the 1960s, which was the decade when installation art began to be so popular that it was acknowledged as an art form for the first time. (We must also bear in mind the role played by museums, exhibition halls and galleries in this respect: the positive attitude of these institutions regarding exhibiting and investing in these monumental works that demand a lot of space undoubtedly stimulated interest by increasing the possibilities for artists to realise their installation projects.)

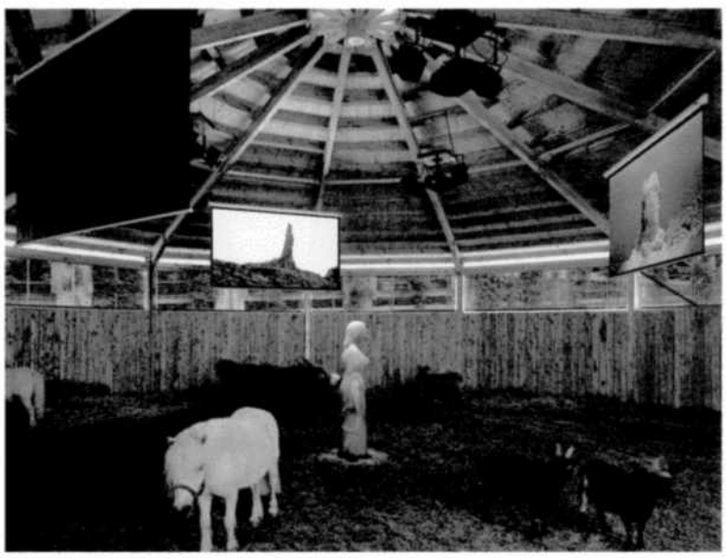
As both of these trends are so conspicuous in art after 1990, it is pertinent to enquire whether or not they are part of the same field. Is there a connection between artists' interest in investigating the concept of 'reality' and their predilection for the installation as an idiom? I believe there is. The installation opens up a whole number of new possibilities for both portraying and intervening in the surroundings. This makes it an obvious choice for artists who want to investigate reality as a phenomenon, concept and construction. In the following I want to identify the nature of the form of expression of the installation, including its orientation to 'reality'. I shall attempt to demonstrate that the 'realism' of installation art is not a transparent, mimetic 'realism' imitative of the appearance of visible reality with the aid of illusionism. On the contrary, it represents an approach to 'reality' which transposes it to a different level. I would go further, too, and argue that installation art plays on the charged relationship of 'reality' to another vital aspect of the installation, which is its fictional and theatrical quality, and that installation art has also got a ritual dimension which sets it apart from other types of art and draws it closer to the art of the stage.

Time, space and observer

What is an installation? This question is just as difficult to answer as what 'reality' and 'realism' are. In contrast to similar definitions of categories like painting, sculpture and photography, which group works together



MIKE KELLEY | PETTING ZOO | EXTERIOR | INSTALLATION OF VARIOUS MATERIALS AND OBJECTS, SALT SCULPTURE, SALT-LICKING ANIMALS, VARIOUS CONSTRUCTIONS AND THREE VIDEO PROJECTIONS | TOTAL AREA: 20 X 45 M² | SKULPTUR PROJEKTE MÜNSTER 07, MÜNSTER



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that share common aspects, the term 'installation' does not cover unique properties regarding form or technique which are characteristic of this type of work of art in particular. Installations are the epitome of the crossover, in that they can employ all sorts of mediums and combine them in many ways. How they do it does not lie outside the special domain of the installation, but is in fact one of its characteristic features. This means that installation art is a field that is open to other forms of expression. Terms like video installation, sculpture installation, performance installation, site specific installation and mixed media installation testify to this openness.

These compound expressions bring us closer to understanding the ability of the installation to network with other art forms. But while all this demonstrates the characteristic diversity of installation art, it also makes it more difficult to comprehend what is peculiar to it. And yet the ability of the installation to connect with other forms suggests that the concept of 'installation' is not so much indicative of inherent properties of the work itself but is more referential to circumstances *around* the work – its outworks, to appropriate an expression.

The outward-going nature of the installation is usually more obvious in cases where the work is realised outside art institutions. The American artist Mike Kelley installed a *Petting Zoo* in one of the courtyards of the high-rise buildings in Münster as part of Sculpture Projects Muenster 07, an exhibition of art in public places. The experience of running into an idyllic children's zoo with farm animals in a 12-sided traditional American stable building surrounded by a lath fence and with a pink henhouse right in the middle of the mostly functionalistic buildings was an enormous surprise. Before getting to the circular enclosure, you went past a 'porter's lodge' with glass walls, containing a rotating disco globe shedding sultry multicoloured light on piles of hay. Then you could walk on from this natural/cultural room with its references to big-city night life, animal instincts and mating rituals, and go to the gate that gave admittance to the animals. The animals could wander at will just like the public, between the open-air enclosure and the stable, where the otherwise cosy and intimate zoo was invested with a superimposed symbolic significance. Kelley's work started with the Old Testament story about the twin cities of sin, Sodom and Gomorrah, which Lot and his wife fled from, the latter being turned into a pillar of salt as a punishment for defying God's prohibition against looking back. According to the legend, the animals went to the pillar of salt to lick it, in the same way the goats, sheep, ponies and cows congregated around the pillar of salt that depicted Lot's wife in Kelley's zoo. The installation space was geographically extended with videotapes projected on screens under the roof of the stable, showing three rock formations called after Lot's wife: one by the Dead Sea, another in New South Wales in Australia, and a third on St. Helen's.

Petting Zoo was a work that consciously employed artistic traditions and linked up several common sculptural and installation strategies, stressing process and context, with a traditional

allegorical pictorial strategy. The videotapes made a connection to American Land Art of the 1970s with its portrayal of nature as a cultural landscape full of signs and myths. Kelley's introduction of petting animals continued another line, too, which was that of the Italian *arte povera*; in particular Jannis Kounellis' installation with live horses in the Roman Galleria l'Atticco in 1969, and the reinterpretation of this work in Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel's *A House for Pigs and People* at Documenta X in 1997. This was a piggery with large glass windows where the public, satiated with art, could settle down and relax and watch the peaceable life of the pigs.

The concept behind *Petting Zoo* which encouraged visitors into a form of participation, which alternated between activity, observation, reflection and discussion, was completely in keeping with artistic practice of the 1990s; this was christened relational aesthetics by the French art theoretician and curator Nicolas Bourriaud[4], and is a practice whose efforts to establish a public space for participation are clearly connected with the more explicit political experiments of the 1960s and 1970s in involving the public.

The individual animals, videotapes and architectural elements had no independent significance. They became a 'work' or rather an 'installation' by forming a *space* in community and interaction with their existing surroundings. This space seems to have functioned on several levels. There was the tactile level of experience where people took time to pet the animals and observe how other visitors related to them. The accompanying exhibition guide confirmed that the work was also intended to function on this primary social and sensory level by telling that scientific investigations had proved that petting animals can reduce stress and actually extend life. There was also the more intellectual level, where the public walked round examining the contents of the installation and deliberated about what the individual elements could signify. As art historian Graham Coulter-Smith has remarked, it was difficult to make head or tail of all the references Kelley had piled up in his zoo.[5] However, when you bear in mind the sexual motifs of Kelley's other works, it did not require much imagination to identify where the lurking feeling of uneasiness in *Petting Zoo* came from. Kelley had intended that the moralistic story of the depraved cities of Sodom and Gomorrah should lead people's thoughts into dirty associations and open their eyes to both the symbolism in the sexualised licking of the pillar of salt's phallic body by the animals' tongues as well as the sensory-erotic element of people caressing the animals which directly involved each individual visitor in the psychosexual question.[6] The contrast between the childlike innocent zoo and the moralistic Bible story about sexuality, guilt and punishment had the effect of drawing the visitor into a charged moral field where the borderlines between guilt and innocence, child and adult, animal and human were disturbingly blurred. As art historian Helmut Draxler has observed, Kelley refused to moralise. He left it up to the public to decide what the moral of the work was.[7]

I believe that Kelley's *Petting Zoo* is representative of a lot of installation art, despite the fact that the use of live animals is relatively rare in contemporary art. *Petting Zoo* demonstrates three typical characteristics which do not have anything to do with the installation as an autonomous work with fixed formal features, but rather with the outworks – or more accurately with *the relations between work and outworks*. First of all, a characteristic of installations is that they activate space and contexts. One normally connects 'installation' with gathering various separate elements and juxtaposing them so they create a spatial relationship or a three-dimensional environment which partly or wholly surrounds the observer and forces him or her to move both body and eyes in various directions.

An installation sometimes involves a physical alteration of the locality in which it is realised, or the establishment of a separate architectural construction within an exhibition space. Thus an installation can be an organisation of elements within the space and in conjunction with it, but also an organisation of the space itself. My point is that this organisation of the work of art as a space and the activation of this space is the most vital characteristic of the installation. For the very reason that installations create spaces which reach out to their surroundings, they must display a sharpened awareness of the effect of the involved reality on the meanings of the work of art, and also of the contexts which the work enters into and attaches itself to.

The second characteristic of installations is their temporal extension of the work, so that they acquire a situational aspect. It always takes time to assimilate a work of art. The nature and duration of this time span varies from medium to medium, as well as with the observer's interest in the work in question, of course. As regards installations, the time taken can be described as being both long and short: the latter,

My point is that this organisation of the work of art as a space and the activation of this space is the most vital characteristic of the installation.

GUILLAUME BIJL | TRAVEL AGENCY | AROS AARHUS KUNSTMUSEUM | 1993 | OFFICE FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT | APPROX. 3 X 7 X 3 M

because many installations are created for a specific exhibition event and are dismantled afterwards. And long, because the construction of the installation as a room with many constituent parts extends the actual assimilation of the work in time so that it acquires a situational nature.

Finally, the third characteristic of installations is that the observer is allowed for, and there is a heightened awareness as to the physical, subjective and temporal aspects of the observer's experience.[8] An installation creates a spatial environment which the observer must enter and move around in. This can develop the observer's awareness of how the body navigates about the work and, more than anything, how vital aspects of experiencing art involve the body and are subject to changing, subjective points of view.

Using stage effects

It is one thing to identify the fundamental artistic effects of the installation, but quite another to explain how they work, because this can happen in several ways. Choosing a trend as a way of approach is viable, for example the interest in 'reality' in contemporary art. Installation art is one of the areas where it is most clearly demonstrated. This is all part and parcel of the contextual orientation of the installation towards the surroundings and work with a specific form of 'realism'. An eloquent expression of this is art historian Rosalind Krauss' idea that the so-called site specific installations, which are so closely linked with the locality that they cannot be detached from it, represent bits of reality with the help of indexical signs, i.e. signs which have the character of traces and imprints.[9] According to this line of thought, the reality of the place is impressed directly on the space and the universe conjured up by the installation.

It is important to bear in mind that the 'realism' to be found in

installation art is generally speaking different from the traditional mimetic realism which we are accustomed to in figurative painting and sculpture.

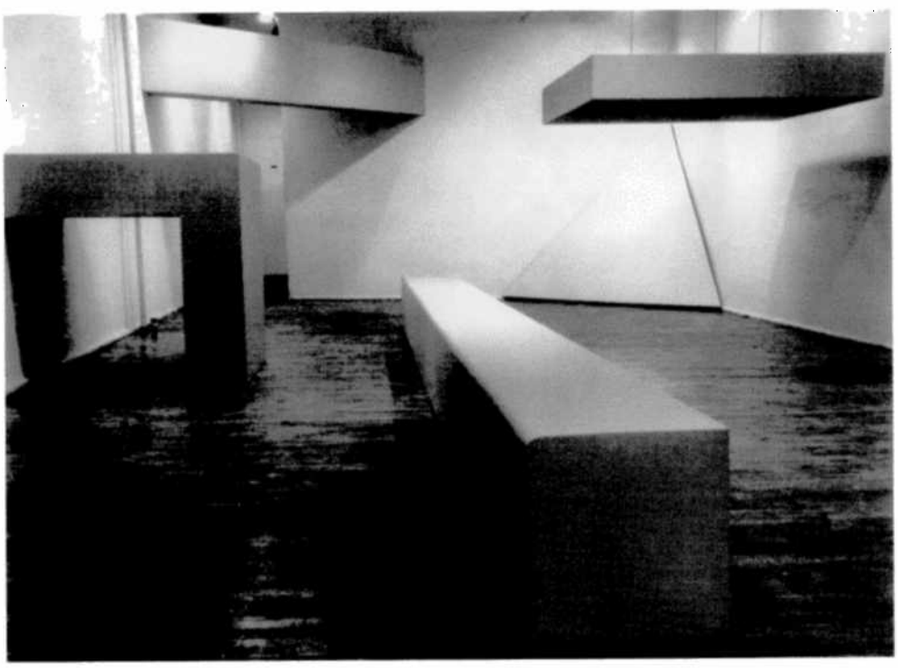
Realism is displaced in installations from the work to the observer and from representation to reception, i.e. the observer's perception and understanding of the work. In other words, the realism of the installation is a sort of mental and sensory realism. It is uncommon that installations present a slice of reality using the artistic effects of illusionism in the same way the photograph can do it. Their realism is far more frequently based on a purposeful opening up of the work to the material of reality. Installations open up to everyday objects and organisational principles which they can reuse or repeat. The result can be tautological sometimes, as in Belgian Guillaume Bijl's normative "transformation installations". In an act of contemporary archaeology, Bijl transfers a piece of functional 'reality' into art's 'unreality' with his taking over of types of interiors from Western consumer society. By doing so, the interiors lose their obvious purpose. They are made relative and altered by being brought into close contact with the discourses and experiential forms of art, which explains Bijl's term "transformation installations".[10]

Everyday behaviour is also integrated in the experience of the work, not least the way we acquaint ourselves with an unknown room by going round in it measuring its size, arrangement and nature against the size of our bodies and from memories of other rooms. Installation art's openness towards reality also includes an ability to allow the physical space to influence the artistic elements which are installed in it, and a willingness to put questions to the world around it and the historical reality, which are significant questions at a given time.

Installation art has a considerable give-and-take relationship with 'reality', but it also has with 'unreality'. Installations are very much a question of staging images and fictions. In other words, they draw pictorial art towards the scenic arts, theatre and performance, with their ability to body fictive situations.

An installation is not intended to be a self-sufficient autonomous unit like modernistic sculpture was. It is intended as a 'stage' for the observer to enter – a spatial structure spread out about the observer who is to be involved in the art experience as a situation or an event. So there is a strong *here-and-now* feeling about installations, just like theatre and performance. It is not so strange that terms like 'theatricality' and 'performativity' keep occurring in the verbal attempts to define installation as a genre. It is typical of both these expressions that they displace attention from the work *per se* to the experience the observer has of it, with the result that it is the work as event and process that becomes central.

The American art historian Michael Fried first introduced the term 'theatricality' in the discussion about 1960s art. In Fried's perceptive critique of the then new-born minimalism, he attached the concept of 'theatricality' to the almost installational staging of sculpture by minimalists Robert Morris and Donald Judd.[11] For Fried, theatricality has nothing to do with actors' dramatics and theatrical bombast, but with stage art's fundamental relationship between the live performance and the audience, and the diffusion of this relationship into pictorial art as a foreign element. Fried sees theatricality as a relationship of intimacy between the observer and the work, which primarily assumes that there is an observer present so that it can come about, and secondly that it can be described as being situational, as the relationship is acted out in time and has a duration. When Fried criticises minimalism for being theatrical, it is because it is concerned with the actual circumstances arising from the observer's meeting with the work. In this way it reveals its debt to the art of the stage.



ROBERT MORRIS | EXHIBITIONS INSTALLED IN GREEN GALLERY, NEW YORK, DECEMBER 1964 – JANUARY 1965

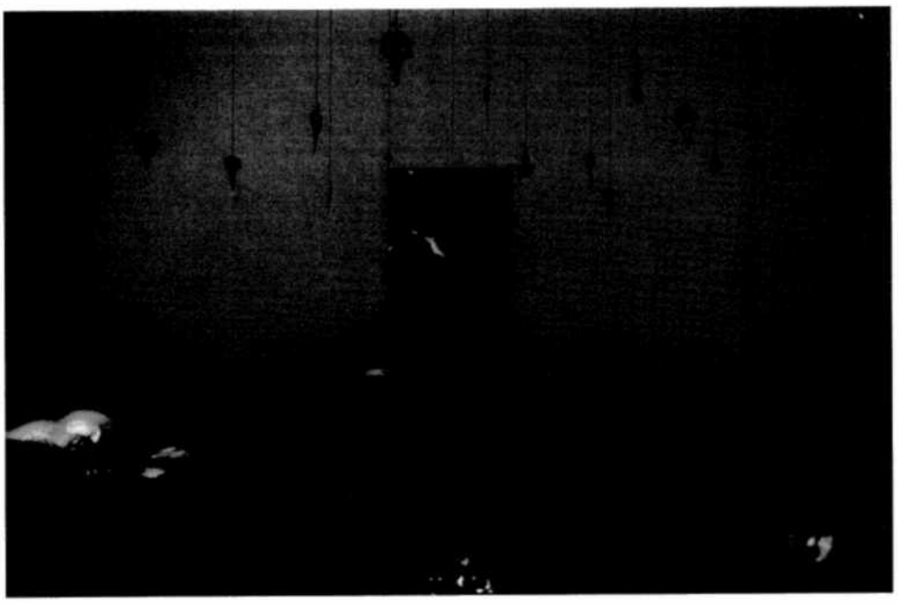
According to Fried, the experience of a minimalist work is an experience of "an object in a *situation* – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder."[12] In other words the minimalist work is not autonomous and does not raise itself to the ideal sphere of timelessness and universality. It is completely dependent on the presence of the public, just like a theatre performance, and finds its expression in a concrete situation. Exactly the same point is recognised in installation art which is why Fried's concept of theatricality has become a key term in discussions about it. The use of the expressions 'performative' and 'performativity' are more recent. They are employed, among others, by contributors to the catalogue *Performative Installation,* who analysed the observer's performative interaction with the work (i.e. actively participating, interpreting and self-reflectional), inspired by the so-called theory of performativity.[13] Their approach is typical as notions of the performative have been particularly used in the art historical field to describe the situational aspect of the observer's assimilation of the work, meaning the processual nature of assimilation and production of meaning.

Performativity can also be inherent in the work itself. In 2005, Annette Messager transformed the French pavilion at the Venice Biennial into an enormous installation in three rooms under the title *Casino*, with this sign in pink neon lighting on the classical facade of the pavilion. To get into the building, visitors had to pass through curtains like those Italians use, for example in St. Mark's Square in Venice, as protection against the heat and sharp light. The curtains signified a border between the brightly lit reality outside and the dimmed dream world inside. 'Casino' has several meanings in Italian, including 'little house', 'brothel' and 'gambling casino'. Messager played subtly on the ambiguity of the word with her personal interpretation and staging of a story which had a local origin and a global reach. Messager has described *Casino* as a spatial sequence in three parts: an "outside", an "inside", and an "innermost".[14] In the first room "outside", the visitor met Pinocchio in the shape of a little wooden puppet in a grotto-like tableau of twisted rolls of foam-rubber covered in pyjama-striped material. The live puppet with a nose that grows when it tells a lie has become part of common global culture, not least thanks to Disney's 1940 cartoon film. The figure originated from the Italian writer Carlo Collodi's children's book *The Adventures of Pinocchio* from 1883, which is about a puppet and its creator, the carver Geppetto, who realises his artist's dream of breathing life into a figure. On one level, the story of Pinocchio is about the artistic act of creation. However, Messager had seen the educative motif of the story, the journey of initiation[15], as far more important; the simultaneously disobedient, curious, gambling and naive Pinocchio undergoes various tests which equip him with the experiences necessary for him to become a *human*.

ANNETTE MESSAGER | CASINO | THE FRENCH PAVILION AT 51ST VENICE BIENNIAL | 2005 | INSTALLATION CONSISTING OF THREE ROOMS | ROOM 1

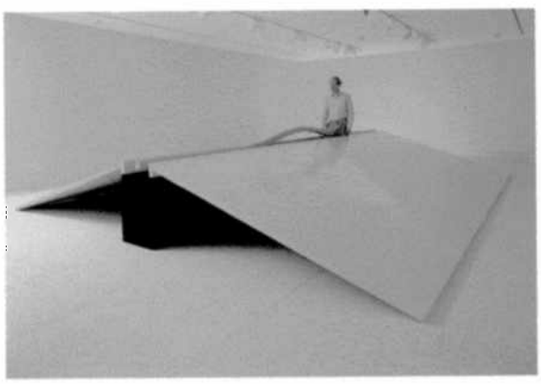
Messager exploited the ability of the puppet to function as a human being's disturbing *alter ego*, an incarnation of the dark side of man. According to Messager, puppets represent "ourselves, with all our sins, everything we do not want to see [...]."[16]

Pinocchio, lying on his back on a pyjama-striped roll of foam-rubber, was carried around in the dangerous dream-world of fear and desire. He disappeared into grottos and was lost from sight until he later appeared again in an unexpected place. The interior of the grottos was hidden, but aggressive black shapes, sharp as the noses of Venetian carnival masks, protruded from cracks in their walls. The soft grotto walls were surrealistically decorated with toys, clothes and the human organs which Pinocchio did not have but desired so as to become human. One went on to the next room, disturbed by this sight. "Inside" was a dim, womb-like cave. A red sea of silk poured out of a door opening in the back wall. It billowed up and down like skin on a living body that breathed and throbbed. While black masks with long Pinocchio noses were slowly lowered from above to the sea of blood and wind, luminous underwater growths emerged from the depths side by side of things the sea had swallowed up. This room full of red and black, life and death, light and dark was dramatic and spectacular. The installation was the location of a physical transformation, an extraordinary apparition which could be observed, but whose outcome could not be determined. One reached the "innermost" room, ignorant of the upshot. In this room, a computer controlled trampoline powered by compressed air fired body parts, pieces of plastic and unidentifiable objects into the air, as if they were trapeze artists in The Mechanical Nightmare Circus. Pinocchio the wooden puppet seemed to have acquired the hu-

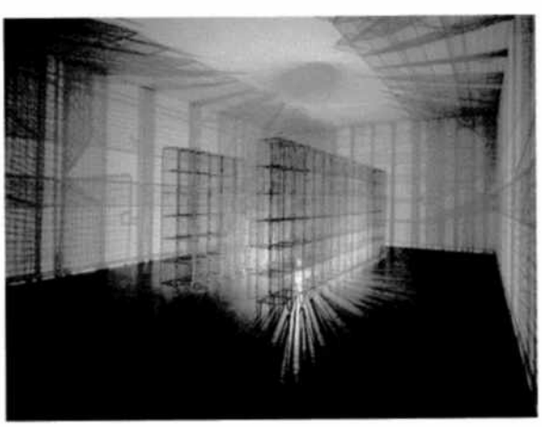


ANNETTE MESSAGER | CASINO | THE FRENCH PAVILION AT 51ST VENICE BIENNIAL | 2005 | INSTALLATION CONSISTING OF THREE ROOMS | ROOM 2

ANNETTE MESSAGER | CASINO | THE FRENCH PAVILION AT 51ST VENICE BIENNIAL | 2005 | INSTALLATION CONSISTING OF THREE ROOMS | ROOM 3



MOWRY BADEN | I WALK THE LINE | 1967 | WOOD, STEEL AND CARPET | APPROX. 104 X 610 X 610 CM | MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SAN DIEGO



MONA HATOUM | LIGHT SENTENCE | 1992 | STEEL WIRE CAGES | ELECTRIC BULB MOVING IN SLOW MOTION BY MOTOR | 198 X 185 X 490 CM | MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE, CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS

ZOE LEONARD | MOUTH OPEN, TEETH SHOWING | 2000 | 162 DOLLS VARIABLE DIMENSIONS | COLLECTION OF WILLIAM AND RUTH TRUE

man limbs' life, but at the same time his body was dismembered and incarcerated in a grotesque machine and an activity that could as well be torture as play. It was impossible to say what sort of life Pinocchio, transformed into a human, had gone into, but there was no fairytale happy ending. Maybe Pinocchio's educative journey and becoming a human had quite simply led him to the understanding that the course of life is an inexorable approach to death?

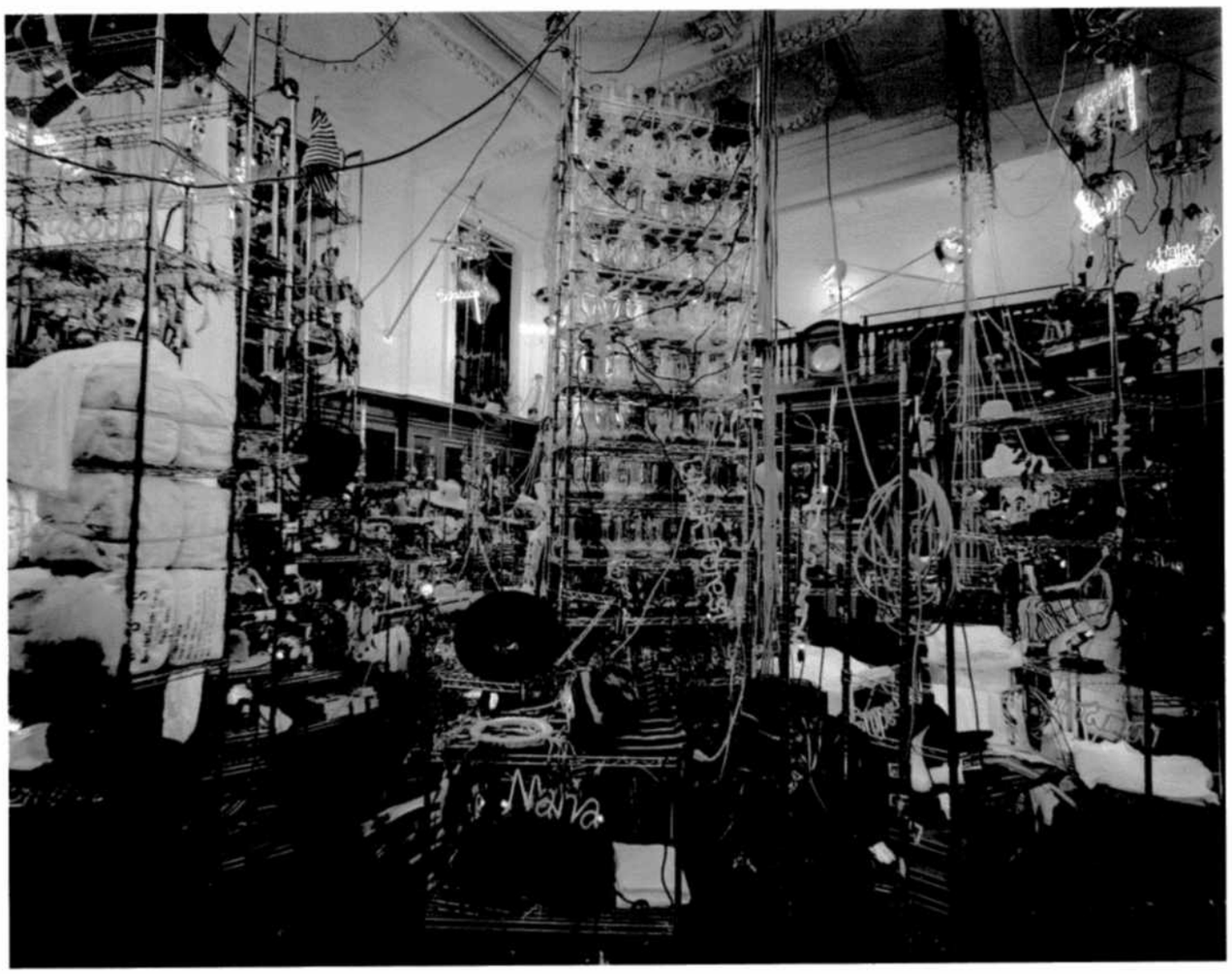
Performative realism

Annette Messager's *Casino* is typical of the types of installation art that employ so many theatrical and stage effects that the question is what the works are most closely related to – pictorial media like painting and sculpture, or stage forms like theatre and circus performances? Messager's *Casino* constructs an absurd universe that very few would connect with "realism", not even the magical realism of imaginative literature. *Casino* demonstrates how far installation art can remove itself from a more traditional illusionistic 'realism' and still emanate tangibility and concretion – what I would call *facticity*.

Many installations like Mike Kelley's *Petting Zoo* put an actively investigating and physically involved observer in the centre and acknowledge that the observer's interpretation of the work must derive from the actual interactive situation which the work locates the observer in. The way in which the installation creates a receiver's position for the public and addresses it – its receptional aesthetics – can be said to be basically facticity. The presentation of a given motif in an installation is not necessarily based on mimetic realism, but an installation will always build on a certain principle of receptional aesthetics, wherever we are in the spectre of expression of this art form, whether it is Messager's surrealist dream or Mike Kelley's down-to-earth zoo; this principle demands that the observer becomes involved in the work through his own actual physical actions.

Actions must be understood in three different ways: first of all as the motor movements with which a person acts, interacts and expresses its intentions and reactions. In installations this is mostly the observer walking so as to be able to connect the elements scattered throughout the space of the installation and so as to regard them from different angles and distances. What sets this apart from usual everyday movements is that it is not improvised but is partly choreographed as part of a process which creates significance.

The artist has presupposed the motion of the observer in the work by laying out one or more possible routes through the work. The way of walking the public adopts is partly predetermined: the actual organisation of the installation hints to the public how they can relate physically to it. It can invite them to participate in a physical or mental ordeal and transcend inner and outer barriers as in the Californian artist Mowry Baden's *I Walk the Line* (1967). The observer is invited to walk down along a narrow passage in the yellow zone which the installation spreads out around the visitor. You have to walk straddled over a bar, though, which rises to above crotch-height in the middle so that it really appears to be an insurmountable hindrance. But as soon as the *body* starts on the walk, the observer, who has now become just as much a participant, using his sense of touch and motor function, as an observer using his eyes only, discovers that Baden's construction conceals a correspondingly angled ramp which aids the visitor over the obstacle in the middle.



JASON RHOADES | THE BLACK PUSSY ... AND THE PAGAN IDOL WORKSHOP | 2005 | VARIOUS MATERIALS | VARIABLE DIMENSIONS | HAUSER AND WIRTH, LONDON

The more disturbing type of installation can stimulate the public to move cautiously and distrustfully forward, as is the case with the threatening grid pattern of shadows flitting across the walls in the British-Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's dimly lit *Light Sentence* (1992). Other installations use the passageway route to gestalt a spiritual journey between mental spaces just as the American video artist Bill Viola did when he sent his public through *Buried Secrets*, a carefully planned sequence of video installations in the American pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 1995. Others again like Zoe Leonard's installation of worn, damaged girl dolls *Mouth open, teeth showing* (2000) and Jason Rhoade's multi-object installations pile up such overwhelming amounts of objects, information and details that the observer ends up absent-mindedly pottering about, aimlessly scanning the work and now and then concentrating on individual parts. This is a form of experience which is reminiscent of what is known as *shopping* in the world of consumption and *zapping* in the media world.[17] So installations can initiate all sorts of ways of walking.

The second way of understanding *actions* is in the self-reflexive meaning of the word where the observer is encouraged to consciously consider the movements and reactions of his own body. The observer must compare this phenomenological reflection with his semiotic reflection about the significance of the signs which the installation produces. To put it another way, the observer must include his own participation when interpreting the work. The performative and referential aspects of the work must be compared to acquire its full meaning. As suggested by Mona Hatoum's *Light Sentence*, one's physical reaction to the installation will often be decisive as regards the way one interprets the work's signs.

In interactive digital installations which invite the observer to participate in certain activities, as in Mike Kelley's *Petting Zoo*, the third and final *action* can consist of carrying out different operations which may have been more or less pre-structured by the

ILYA KABAKOV | THE TOILET | STONE, CEMENT, WOOD, PAINT, MEN'S TOILET, WOMEN'S TOILET, HOUSEHOLD GOODS AND APPLIANCES, FURNITURE | APPROX. 450 X 417 X 1100 CM | DOCUMENTA IX, KASSEL

artist, and often contain some possibilities of choice. There is not often any real freedom of action, however.

As shown by these examples, installation art draws on some quite common everyday abilities: walking, finding your way in a certain space and decoding its arrangement, zapping, shopping, and interacting with other people or animals. Installation artists make closer bonds between the work of art and culture and everyday social life by activating ingrown habits and abilities. This also helps give installations a feeling of verisimilitude or 'social recognisability', in the words of the Russian installation artist Ilya Kabakov in his description of his work with the form of comprehensive spatial staging which he calls "the total installation". Kabakov writes that the observer has prior knowledge as to how he or she shall behave in a work of this nature, thanks to "social recognisability":

"This 'social recognisability' by the viewer of the place where he finds himself, is extraordinarily important for the total installation because he knows how to behave in it, where and how to move in such an interior. It is this movement, this travel of his in the "social" medium of the installation that is one of the most important artistic means in working with the total installation [...]"[18]

The interesting thing about Kabakov – and in this respect he is a typical installation artist – is that his efforts are aimed at investing his installations with a "social recognisability" by arranging them in what looks like an interior and at the same time indicating the artificiality of this arrangement. There is often a tension on the experiential level in installations between on the one hand the familiarising facticity brought about by the installation's "social recognisability" and on the other hand an underlining

of the fact that it is an artificial, staged construction. This means that the form of realism prevalent in installation art is no 'transparent' or 'immediate' realism, but realism permeated with artistic self-reflexivity. It is also a type of realism that is more effective on a receptive level than on a representational level.

What is characteristic of the installation's realism is that it presupposes the actual physical actions of the observer, in that it calculates with the effect of realism attached to the observer's active investigation of the work and interaction with it. So realism is the result of the observer's interaction with the work. You can accordingly call it *performative realism*.[19] The facticity of this interaction exists in the charged relationship to theatricality in the expression and effect of the installation. It is this relationship between facticity and theatricality which makes experiencing installations basically ambivalent. The observer is caught between intimacy and distance, the body's absorption and the distance of unfamiliarisation; one is inside as a participant and outside as an observer – at one and the same time.

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If one takes Jeppe Hein's *Changing Space* (2003), which is an apparently empty, white exhibition room, a naked modernistic 'white cube', one realises that the room is not static if one stays in it for a while. It slowly changes shape, as one of the walls moves. The observer would have to make a conscious oppositional act not to participate in the room's performance and surrender to the room's diminution and expansion by moving continuously. Hein's installation is a very simple experimental investigation of the interaction between body and space, individual and surroundings, showing how even minute alterations in our surroundings affect the place the individual occupies. *Changing Space* also demonstrates something general to us about the interplay between body and space in installation art.

Because the observer makes a physical entry into the zone of the work and is more or less absorbed by it, a fusion of spaces seems to come into being, where the borderline between work of art and reality is blurred, and observer and work belong to the same sphere. It is of course only an illusion that there is a fusion of the work's own space, i.e. the place from which the work speaks, and that of the observer, i.e. the physical and experiential place from which the observer sees the work. But it is a very persuasive illusion as far as the senses are concerned and gives substance to the air of facticity which surrounds many installations. This apparent merging is caused by the special way the installation articulates the question of the frame. The frame defines what is work, and what is not. It establishes the work as an individual unit. Very few installations have a fixed, physical frame. Their frames are often indistinct, as the framing is only marked by a virtual frame, i.e. a frame which establishes the borderline between picture and non-picture through semiotic means.[20] As the virtual frame does not have an unambiguous and marked physical presence, its demarcation is indefinite.

This can be clearly felt in Matthew Buckingham and Joachim Koester's *Sandra of the Tulip House or How to Live in a Free State* (2001). A group of video projections with attached listening stations are scattered over a fair sized space, with no visible sign of frame or specification of order, so the visitor has to go from station to station in random order to be able to piece together a version of the story of a girl called Sandra's stay in Christiania.[21] When one has moved around in the work for a while, one realises that it consists of a web of different stories about Christiania. *Sandra of the Tulip House* weaves together history-book facts and 'actual' historical events in Christiania with the personal memories of the people living in Christiania and Sandra's reflections about the 'free state' as an urban utopia. All the stories contain some factually correct information about Christiania. At the same time, they all have an element of subjectivity and construction, and they cannot be co-ordinated to make a whole. More than anything else, Sandra's local and individual micro-story collides with the history books' depersonalised official macro-story. In this context, Sandra becomes a figure of identification for the observer, being the subjectivity that filters the stories' facts and *doxa*.[22]

Fictional space

Sandra of the Tulip House reminds us of one aspect of the installation which was lightly touched upon above: an installation has not only spatial, temporal and performative dimensions, but also fictive and semiotic ones. The work tells a story which is a general statement about the world. In *Pit Music* (1996), Joachim Koester has had the intention of

JOACHIM KOESTER | PIT MUSIC | 1996 | VIDEO, SOUND, 14:00, STAGE | STATENS MUSEUM FOR KUNST

demonstrating how the installation weaves the fictive and the interpretative into the concrete and real. In *Pit Music*, the public step onto an empty platform from which they can look out over an 'orchestra pit' at a video showing a chamber orchestra's performance of a Shostakovich string quartet. The audience are not sitting down, like normal, but are standing on a platform identical to the first one. On looking closer, one can see that it is actually in a gallery at a private view, where although most are listening to the concert, there are also signs of distraction: guests and cameramen shift a bit or move around, while people sip their wine and exchange discreet remarks. At the end of the videotape, the concert is drowned by the conversation, while the music continues unaffected. While the sound track strengthens the documentary realism, the visual element draws attention to the fictional aspect of the documentary film. Not only does the video tape cross-cut images in time and space outside the concert situation, there are also abrupt changes of tempo, where the visual flow of the video tape is suddenly braked by still close-ups and slow motion, interrupting the parallel course of the sound and image tracks and make the work change momentarily from being a 'documentary' to a lyrical 'portrait' of the listener's contemplation.

As an idiom, the installation is both spatial and concrete and

also intensely charged with significance, however factual, mundane or like a documentary it may seem to be. Regarded structurally, the installation is a fusion of an aesthetically organised space and what I would call *fictional space*. In the creation of the space of the installation, objects and actions are linked so that there is a semiotic intensification and the public is forced into seeing the objects or the actions 'in the other light', i.e. that of fiction. There are many installations which combine a lot of different elements into a complex whole, like Henrik Plenge-Jacobsen's *Villa Spies* (1999-2000), and leave it to the public to work out the significance of the combination of the individual parts. This means that the fictional space does not consist of a stable core of fictional material which exists prior to the observer stepping into the work as a passive receptor of its message. The term fictional space denotes received fiction. The fictional space is thus an intangible thing which comes into existence through the observer's performative participation in the work as the sum of the signs the artist has laid down in the work, and an observer's individual interpretation of them.

The mediated presence

As pointed out in the introduction, installation art has generated several sub-genres by now. Video installation is probably the most common of them.[23] Its installational characteristic lies in its drawing the observer into a spatial environment, but the living images imbue the work with a more dynamic nature and a more temporally developed sequence than installations created with static objects. Video installations underline the fact that 'space' is not static but consists of dynamic and mutable phenomena, just like Jeppe Hein's *Changing Space* employing architectural means. Video installations also exploit the strong appeal that living pictures have in influencing a public to identify. It is this seductive appeal in particular that Joachim Koester attempts to counteract in *Pit Music*. The interrupted montage hinders the live audience's identification with the one on the video tape. Koester tries instead to get the public to look at the installation as a construction, in actual fact as a fiction, even though the video tapes document a concert. In contrast to a cinema audience, a video installation audience is in motion, which is something that the standing and perambulating concert audience in *Pit Music* reflects. Spectators stroll in and out of the room at random intervals in video installations and often circulate between several different projections or elements in the work. This is a behavioural pattern more common to the distracted experience of television or a private view rather than the absorption of the cinema. Film and art theoretician Raymond Bellour has remarked that it is difficult to find the right words for the "disorganised, fragmented, shaken, periodically appearing spectator" of the video installation.[24] *Pit Music* does not give us the right words, but a picture of it.

The video installation differs from both film and theatre in that it is not a proscenium art form, i.e. it does not take place on a separate stage or screen which clearly demarcates the public's 'here and now' from the tapes' 'other place and other time'. Nor does the video installation confine itself to the physical frame of the film screen or the individual monitor. It commingles with the three-dimensional space and the objects in it. In contradistinction to film and television, the screen used for projecting the images onto can be anything at all, in principle. In a way the 'other place' and 'other time' of the images is rooted in the same physical space occupied by the observer, despite the fact that the images of the universe of the film always remain separated from the 'observer's space' by a virtual frame. Images in a video installation appear as if they are situated in the same environment as the observer. They surround the observer and build up a form of spatiality which is governed by change and movement and which influences the static space of the environment and makes the observer's localisation uncertain. This spatial difference from the proscenium art forms, and also the sound track which often supports the visual sense of being in the middle of the universe of the film, make the video installation one of the most spellbinding of the sub-genres of installation art with its sensory and mental aspects. Although the effect has been created by artificial means, the public easily gain the experience of sharing time and space with the work. The living pictures give the feeling that the video installation is taking place at the actual moment one is there.

Most video artists are very aware of this effect. Many exploit it in consciously shaping the work so that it enhances this special sense of presence, which will always be a mediated feeling.[25] The classical example of this is Bill Viola's suggestively absorbing multi-screen installations. Ann Lislegaard's *Nothing but Space* (1997) should also be mentioned here. The installation space is divided into two by a screen with video projections on both sides. The projections show people walking about an art studio. The motif is prosaic, but the effect is hyper-realistic and psychedelic. Lislegaard has not focused the camera on the room itself, but its reflections in the flexible mirror foil of the sort NASA developed for perceptual experiments with the sensory and psychological reactions of people in a weightless state. *Nothing but Space* seems to replace a masculine perception of space and architecture with the vision of a feminine

one. The static, straight lines of the architecture are transformed into mobile organic curves, where things wind sinuously and bodies appear from thin air, come towards one, split up into two or three shapes and then disappear again into nothingness. The destabilising of the room is transmitted to the observer as a feeling of being sucked into an unstable, hypnotic world where everything is distorted. *Nothing but Space* is about how a room is altered, and how this transforms one's perception of it.[26]

Where Lislegaard attempts to suck the observer in, other video installation artists try to counteract the seduction and sense of presence so as to better reveal the conventions and ideologies which underpin the seduction and 'realism' of the media and art. This is true of both Koester and also British Sam Taylor-Wood. In *Travesty of a Mockery* (1995), Taylor-Wood has split up a scene with a quarrel about conjugal life so that the woman and the man appear on separate projections on separate walls, but still interacting with each other. The situation seems a prototype like takes for a melodramatic television series. The public can only hear snatches of the clichés the couple shout at each other, but they are enough to suggest the basic pattern. She is beside herself and makes demands; he laughs mockingly and rejects her.

The symbolism of the spatial organisation is quite evident: separation is synonymous with distance. The quarrelling pair cannot reach each other because they are pent up in their individual emotional cells. Sam Taylor-Wood's splitting up the unity of the episode into the individual roles also contains a representational criticism, because she exhibits cinematic social realism as masked fiction supported by the means of its staging being rendered invisible as a dictate of convention.

Passage works

Installations rarely confine themselves merely to staging the experience of art. They also ritualise it, as they concern themselves with transitions or passages – from art to reality, from one medium to others, from the visual to the theatrical, from the sense of sight to other physical senses. Passage means way through. The word can refer both to a material structure that admits a movement through it, like a corridor, and also to the movement itself through or past this structure, i.e. actually walking along the corridor. Its compass is thus not restricted to stable structures and meanings. It also embraces fleeting and performative dimensions, like people's movements through space, and the channelling of information through a medium, which is always susceptible to change.

My contention is that an installation can function as a passage. Ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep has formulated one of the most influential anthropological readings of the phenomenon in his book *Les rites de passage* (1909). The Norwegian translation *Rites de passage: Overgangsriter* has probably retained van Gennep's French denotation because the Norwegian 'overgangsriter' (*transitional rituals*) does not contain the double nature of structure and process in the passage concept.[27]

Arnold van Gennep is the originator of the structural tripartite division of rituals communicating transitions in life (e.g. from boy to adult warrior), which has since become accepted. His theory of the function of ritual as passage and change has been very influential within both anthropological studies of rituals and theatre studies of performance. This brings us into the vicinity of installation art, which – apart from actual performance art – is the most 'scenic' of pictorial art idioms.

Arnold van Gennep's reading of rituals is based on the understanding of the ritual common to both anthropology and the history of religions, as a conscious physical action where the body and its social and cultural identity are confronted by another world, which is often transcendental. According to van Gennep, the introductory phase, *separation*, involves the exclusion of the person undergoing the ritual from his or her place in the community, often physically isolated in a holy spot. The intermediate phase is *transition*, leading into a no-man's-land for the identity, where the person moves from one state to another and can gain new insight. The ritual drama is usually enacted in this threshold or borderline situation. In the concluding phase, *incorporation*, the person has adopted his or her new identity and can again be incorporated into the community with a new status. According to van Gennep, the rite of passage in many tribal communities was associated with the physical passage of a body through a door, gateway or other physical opening, or else with a movement over a border marked with a sign or a symbolic object. This spatial marking of the transitional phase throws an interesting light on installation art, as many installations are arranged and marked as a 'special' zone; one must step in through a door, or cross a more or less clearly marked 'dividing line'. This means that installations have zone markings corresponding to the function of the door and borderline in the ritual, as it demonstrates "the borderline between the alien and the domestic world". Crossing this threshold is the same as "leaving a previous world to step into a new one".[28] Mowry Baden's *I Walk the Line* is probably the best example illustrating the zonal nature of the installation. If one regards the installation from the point of view of van Gennep's theory of ritual, the observer's acquisition of the work takes on

SAM TAYLOR-WOOD | TRAVESTY OF A MOCKERY | 1995 | TWO CHANNEL VIDEO, SOUND, 10:00 | STATENS MUSEUM FOR KUNST

the nature of a rite of passage in a spatially staged sequence in three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. The installation can accordingly be said to establish a special context like the ritual, with the purpose of transforming the person who goes through it, although it can never change one's status or life in the same way as a real ritual does. On the other hand, the aesthetic experience can well imbue the observer with uncertainty, a feeling of crisis or an experience of going outside one's familiar personality and being temporarily placed in the borderline state of transition.

One of the most obvious examples of this psychological phenomenon is *Test Site*, which consists of five enormous slides installed by the German artist Carsten Höller in Tate Modern's giant Turbine Hall in 2006. Höller offered the public entertainment the opportunity to test themselves, and reflection by participating in a playful experiment which involved the outer, physical as well as the inner, spiritual. The experience of the work in *Test Site* was a literal physical passage into, through and out of the long spiral tubes of the installation, an accelerated trip in time and space which could put the visitor into an ecstatic state of joy.[29] The radical transformation of awareness hardly lasted much longer than the trip itself, but what was decisive for Höller was not the duration of the actual experience, but the ability of the experience to indicate the potential for deeper change:

People who go down the slides have a particular expression on their faces; they're affected and to some degree "changed". [...] I'd like to suggest that using slides on an everyday basis could change us, just as other commodities are changing us. For instance, I'm convinced that the use of cars has changed our perception of time. I could imagine slides having an impact, too. The state of mind that you enter when sliding, of simultaneous delight, madness and 'voluptuous panic', simply can't disappear without traces afterwards.30

Carsten Höller's semi-scientific *Test Site* is not so far from Annette Messager's *Casino* regarding the desire to send the observer on a journey which is simultaneously spatial, physical and also affects the awareness. Messager states in an interview in the exhibition folder,

I want my Casino to be a real journey. You're cut off from the outside by curtains and I use the different rooms to provide different stopovers. The first room has a kind of somnambulistic rhythm, but it speeds up and broadens out in the second, before exploding in the third. The visitor makes the journey with me, which is what I am always after.[31]

As is suggested by theatre researchers' predilection for van Gennep's concepts of ritual, the installation is not the only artistic form of expression which can catalyse the experience of a passage. What is peculiar to the installation is that it is very close to the experienced ritual by making the observer the subject of the experience of passage. It stages the experience of the work as a bodily, physical movement into a delimited zone, often demarcated from its surroundings, in which the observer crosses "the borderline between the alien and the domestic" (van Gennep). It does not make shift with involving the observer mentally; it also activates the observer both physically and performatively. My conclusion is that many installations can be described as works of passage, not only in a formal sense but also in an existential sense, because by using the means described above, they attempt to carry the observer over a threshold and into a sphere and a state which alienates the person from quotidian forms, codes and norms. They strive to set up another space, a state of emergency which puts the observer into a receptive state which is neither part of routine daily life with its habitual mindsets or the clarification of the new insight, which may or may not await the observer on the other side of the visit to the exhibition. Seen in this light, all installations are what Guillaume Bijl calls transformation installations. They aim at creating transitional states with space for reflection and the possibility of change. ■

CARSTEN HÖLLER | TEST SITE | SLIDES | TATE MODERN | LONDON | 2006

Notes

1 An important publication in connection with the introduction of the expression *New Internationalism* is: Jean Fisher (ed.): *Global Visions. Toward a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, London 1994. See also: Jannie Haagemann and Stine Høholt: "Mod et nyt kunstnerisk verdenskort? De nye biennaler og den globale samtidskunst" in Hans Dam Christensen, Anders Michelsen and Jacob Wamberg (ed.): *Kunstteori. Positioner i nutidig kunstdebat*, Copenhagen 1999, pp. 121-148.

2 The American art historian Rosalind Krauss demonstrated the potential of the concept of 'field' back in 1978 in "Sculpture in the Expanded Field". The article has had great influence on the further use of the term within contemporary art. Rosalind Krauss: "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernistic Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1987, pp. 276-90.

3 Hal Foster: *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge Mass. and London 1996.

4 Nicolas Bourriaud: *Relational Aesthetics*. Les presses du reel 2002. The French edition *Esthétique relationelle* was issued by the same publishers in 1998.

5 Graham Coulter-Smith: "Mike Kelley. Petting Zoo, Munster Sculpture Project 07", 2007, at artintelligence.net: http://artintelligence.net/review/?p=135#more-135. Visited 28.02.2008.

6 Mike Kelley: "Mike Kelley. Petting Zoo, Inner Courtyard at Von-Steuben-Str. 4-6" in Brigitte Franzen, Kasper Konig and Carina Plath (ed.): *Sculpture Projects Muenster 07*, Cologne 2007, pp. 126-37.

7 Helmut Draxler: "Mike Kelleys Allegorie der realisierten Demokratie", 2007, at artnet.de: http://www.artnet.de/magazine_de/reviews/hdraxler/draxler09-04-07.asp. Visited 28.02.2008.

8 This thesis regarding the nature of the genre of the installation is expanded with many more nuances and examples in my forthcoming book: *Rumdannelser. Installationen mellem billed og scene*, Museum Tusculanums Forlag: in print.

9 Rosalind E. Krauss: Notes on the Index, i+ii, in "*The Originality of the Avantgarde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1986, pp. 196-220.

10 Guillaume Bijl: "En introduktion" (1991) in Liliane Dewachter (ed.): *Guillaume Bijl*, a travelling exhibition shown at Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp; Kunstverein Freiburg; Arken Museum for Modern Art, Copenhagen 1996, pp. 43-45.

11 Michael Fried: "Art and Objecthood" in Gregory Battock (ed.): *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1995, pp. 116-47.

12 Ibid., p. 125.

13 Nollert, Angelica (ed.): *Performative Installation*, Cologne 2003. Since the early 1990s, performativity theories deriving from philosophers John Austin and John Searle's speech act theories, in particular deconstructivist Jacques Derrida's and gender researcher Judith Butler's interpretations of them, have become common within the cultural sciences, including aesthetic subject areas like art history, theatre studies and performance studies. The concept of performativity in this connection has become a useful instrument in accounting for the processes by which identities are created and altered, and to regard the interpretative action itself or to write a text as a performative activity. See: Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "Introduction. Performativity and Performance" in Andrew Parker and and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (ed.): "*Performativity and Performance*", London and New York, 1995: pp. 1.18.

14 Annette Messager, quoted from: Fabian Stech: "Pinocchio im Bordelle. Fabian Stech im Gespräch mit Annette Messager" in *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 177, 2005, pp. 202-11, p. 203.

15 Annette Messager, quoted from ibid., p. 204.

16 Annette Messager, quoted from ibid., p. 206.

17 For an elaboration on *shopping* and *zapping* as forms of experience which have wandered from the worlds of everyday culture into high culture, see: Anne Marit Waade: "Teater i en teatraliseret samtidskultur – resepsjonskulturelle monster i aktuell scenekunst", PhD thesis, unpublished, Univeristy of Aarhus, 2002.

18 Ilya Kabakov: *Über die ‚totale' Installation. On the ‚Total' Installation*, Ostfildern 1995, p. 246.

19 I have further elucidated this in my essay: "Between image and stage. The theatricality and performativity of installation art" in Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev (ed.): *Performative Realism*, Copenhagen 2005, pp. 209-34, and in my forthcoming book *Rumdannelser, Installationen mellem billed og scene* (see note viii).

20 For further elucidation of the semiotic principle of the frame, see Jens Toft: "Om rammer og rammesætning. Betragtninger over billedets grænser" in *Periskop* no. 3, 1994, pp. 99-132.

21 Christiania: also known as *Freetown Christiania* is a partly self-governing area of about 850 residents, covering 34 hectares (85 acres) in Copenhagen. Christiania has semi-legal status as an independent community.

22 *Doxa* are presuppositions and assumptions, i.e. meanings which have a certain amount of uncertainty connected with them, in contrast to *episteme*, which is hard and fast knowledge. For a more detailed work analysis see Marianne Torp: "Man antager, at visse historier eksisterer..." in Sven Bjerkhof (ed.): *Matthew Buckingham & Joachim Koester. Sandra of the Tulip House or How to Live in a Free State*, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen 2001, pp. 4-16.

23 For further elaboration of considerations regarding the video installation as a genre, see my essay: Anne Ring Petersen: "Navigation, immersion og interaktion i videoinstallationskunsten" in *turbulens.net*, vol. #11, 2008, special issue on "Liv, krop og teknologi", ed. Ulrik Ekman and Arild Fetveil, to be found at http://www.turbulens.net.

24 Raymond Bellour: "Of an Other Cinema" in Sara Arrhenius, Magdalena Malm and Cristina Ricupero (ed.): *Black Box Illuminated*, Lund 2003, pp. 39-62, p. 24.

25 Margaret Morse: "Video Installation Art. The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-Between" in Dough Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (ed.): *Illuminating Video. An Essential Guide to Video Art*, New York 1990, pp. 152-67.

26 Knut Åsdam: "Feministisk strategi og blindpunkter. Ann Lislegaard intervjuet av Knut Åsdam" in *UKS – Forum for Samtidskunst*, no. 3-4, 1997, pp. 10-13, p. 13.

27 Arnold van Gennep: Les rites de passage: étude systématique des rites, Paris 1909. Arnold van Gennep: *Rites de passage: Overgangsriter*, Oslo 1999.

28 Arnold van Gennep: *Rites de passage: Overgangsriter*, Oslo 1999.

29 Videotape made on the trip down the five different slides can be seen at: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/carstenholler/video/shtm. Visited on 28.02.2008.

30 Carsten Höller in an interview with Vincent Honoré: "The Unilever Series: Carsten Höller": see: http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/carstenholler/interview/shtm. Visited on 25.02.2008.

31 Annette Messager quoted from an interview with Suzanne Pagé and Béatrice Parent in: *Annette Messager. Casino*. Folder accompanying the eponymous exhibition at the French pavilion, Venice Biennial 2005, unpag.